As a compulsive collector of pop culture trivia, I track famous people whose lives have intersected with Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania—not just the Gene Kellys, Andy Warhols, and Michael Keatons, but the others, too, like Pat Buchanan (mother from Washington County), Alan Freed (born in Windber) and Charles Bronson (raised in Ehrenfeld, near Johnstown).

Recently, my cravings led me inside a gossipy unauthorized 1989 biography by Christopher Anderson, where I discovered the mother of them all: Madonna (Louise Veronica Ciccone). Seems the pop diva spent a lot of her childhood in Aliquippa. Looking deeper, I found a 1985 interview with her in Time. Her father, she said, grew up “right outside of Pittsburgh” and she visited her grandparents there “all the time.”

As most of her fans already know, Madonna was born and raised in suburban Detroit. What they probably don’t know is that the Beaver County steel town was a kind of second home. Her mother’s death at an early age solidified Madonna’s paternal bond and virtually assured that extended family and all that comes with it—the reunions, the weddings, the holiday visits—would revolve around Aliquippa and the Ciccone clan.

Madonna says that her visits as a child to her father’s family in West Aliquippa—an “Italian ghetto-like neighborhood,” she told Time—were sometimes as much work as pleasure. In her Rolling Stone essay last year on the “meaning of summer,” she recalled toiling around her grandparents’ house and in her father’s vegetable garden.

The story of how Aliquippa figured into Madonna’s genealogy, based on Andersen and a few scant historical sources, goes something like this: Sometime around 1919, paternal grandparents Gaetano and Michelina Ciccone left the village of Pacentro in the Abruzzi of central Italy for the United States. By 1925, according to a city directory, the Cicones had taken up residence in Aliquippa at 420 Allegheny Avenue, a stone’s throw from St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church, and a short walk to the sprawling Jones and Laughlin steel works. The city directory lists Gaetano as a “wire worker.”

As we all know, her family’s story was repeated hundreds of thousands of times, in dozens of towns across the region between 1880 and 1920. In 1930, over 4,200 Italian immigrants and their children were living in Aliquippa, most clustered together in what became known as West Aliquippa. More than likely, the Ciccones’ decision...
to settle there rather than, say, Brooklyn, was determined by word of mouth and Old World regional ties: the vast majority of Aliquippa's Italian community hailed from the Abruzzi, many from the same villages. By 1925, there were in fact three Ciccone households on Allegheny Avenue, including, I'd bet, the Ciccone who had sent word to Madonna's grandfather of work in the mills.

Gaetano and Michelina raised a family that included six sons. According to Andersen, the youngest possessed an ambition that drove him beyond the Little Italy of Aliquippa and a job at the J & L. While undoubtedly conversant in his parents' tongue, Madonna's father, like most children of first-generation immigrants, preferred English and the more American-sounding version of his given name. "Tony" (Silvio) worked his way through college and, with degree in hand, extricated himself from Aliquippa by landing a job in Detroit's expanding post-war auto industry.

Soon afterward, he married a woman of French Canadian ancestry named Madonna Forten, who gave birth in 1958 to their first daughter, on whom the couple bestowed the mother's unequivocally Catholic first name. The rest, as they say, is herstory.

To someone growing up in Detroit's suburbs, Aliquippa must have been a distant place, but it surely shaped Madonna's sense of being "ethnic." Despite rarely using her last name, the Material Girl does not shy away from her heritage. On a 1987 world tour that took her near Pacento, she publicly proclaimed (reportedly in her grandparents' native tongue): "I'm proud to be Italian." Most Italians welcomed the association, though not all; an enterprising Rome reporter tracked down a distant aunt, who scoffed that the girl is a singer, just a singer. In my time, we didn't behave like that."

If nothing else, Madonna's Aliquippa side of the family — and the faith that became her primary inheritance — gave the budding singer/dancer/artiste something to rebel against. In Andersen's account, Grandma Ciccone emerges as a vaguely repressive traditionalist who, intent to ensure Madonna's virginity, brandished rosaries and the occasional crucifix. But being Italian in Aliquippa had another dimension. Did her grandfather, who died in 1973, live long enough to tell his Detroit granddaughter stories about the thoroughly modern impulse that drove him from Pacento to Aliquippa, or about the trials and tribulations of being a foreigner in a town of "Johnny Bulls?" This was 1920s America, remember. Had he been among those forced to bribe the mill foreman for a hot and dirty job on the floor of the blast furnace?

I was curious to know just how much of this working-class immigrant history Madonna absorbed on those visits back to Aliquippa. Unfortunately, as I began working my way through nearly a half-column of Ciccones in the Aliquippa phone book, it became apparent that family lore would not be forthcoming. Those relations who listened long enough to hear me out uniformly refused comment. The owner of Loretta's Beauty Salon confirmed that she was indeed the megastar's first cousin, but provided nothing more (including a last name). "You're not going to get anyone around here to talk to you," Loretta advised.
The wall of silence was discouraging but understandable in an age when obsessed fans and paparazzi pick through garbage for slivers of celebrity.

Faced with a dearth of facts, I was left to imagine Madonna's incidental contact with the coarsely ethnic world of West Aliquippa. The summers spent at her grandparents' house are a case in point. For Madonna, the chores were an exercise in pure tedium — at best, evidence of the family's obstinate blue-collar work ethic (which many observers believe informs her own lusty appetite for rehearsing). But for her grandparents, tending to a backyard garden likely provided something more, including among other things an emotional barrier against canned or flash-frozen veggies or other things modern. There's also a good chance that on one of her visits, she watched her grandfather make homemade wine or parade through West Aliquippa one August on the traditional Italian feast-day. (The San Rocco Festival had been carried over from the Old Country by immigrants from Patrica, in Abruzzi; today, it's as much a homecoming celebration for expatriated sons and daughters of Italian Aliquippa as it is a religious feast day.)

And what about her own father's decision to pursue a college degree? Many immigrant parents expressed mixed feelings about education, for it was a potentially dangerous source of cosmopolitan ideas that threatened tradition and family — values known to be particularly strong among Italian immigrants. At the same time, few steelworkers wished for their sons the same fate that had befallen them.

Had Silvio's decision to attend college sparked a conflict in the Ciccone household among siblings who simultaneously wished for their kid brother's success while resenting his shot at upward mobility? (Like an extraordinary number of steelworkers' sons, Madonna's father majored in engineering.)

Madonna, publicly, only recalls his ambition and desire to leave Aliquippa. "It's not that he was ashamed, really," she told Time, "but he wanted to be better... I think he wanted us to have a better life than he did when he was growing up." Biographer Andersen insists Silvio did not abandon his parents' faith, however. Every day before school, Madonna was marched off with the rest of the family to Mass. To the young libertine, such rigid devotion to what she called an "extremely sexist" religion seemed oppressive; to her father, it may have been a way to compensate for the identity he had left behind in West Aliquippa.

Finally, I wondered how the Aliquippa paesani reacted to Madonna's growing fame, particularly the flagrant renunciation of sexual modesty that went along with her 1980s "Boy Toy" persona.

When the first wave of Madonna fever gripped the nation in 1985, uncles Guy and Peter Ciccone seemed oblivious to the blasphemous spectacle of stiletto heels, fishnet stockings, and rosary beads she was set to showcase at the Civic Arena. (Her writhing stage antics proved mild compared to the condemnations from the Catholic Church that followed the release of her "Like a Prayer" video in 1989.) Speaking to a reporter for the Beaver County Times,
the uncles had only good things to say about their pretty young niece and the flair for dancing she exhibited at family weddings and get-togethers. Unable to produce the home video stills for you here, we are left to imagine how the teenaged Madonna might have slithered to the chicken dance or the tarantella at the local fire hall.

When Madonna's fame and infamy reached its apex in the late 1980s, the town of Pacentro considered erecting a statue to her, hoping as much to attract tourists as to bestow honorary citizenship on its "most famous descendent." Although Aliquippa's claim is just as strong, it has no comparable movement—no historical markers dedicated to the mill that her father studiously avoided, or the family home she visited as a child, or the hall where she danced for her relations. (Lord knows Aliquippa could use the influx of tourist dollars at least as much as Pacentro.)

Today, Madonna's cousins and aunts and uncles keep quiet vigil in post-industrial Aliquippa. It would be easy enough to attribute their silence to familial loyalty. But it could also have something to do with this: in a place where immigration and industry were synonymous, and where ethnicity was part of the fabric of everyday life, the only thing remarkable about Madonna's Aliquippa family history was how ordinary it probably was. And in a city and a region where thousands upon thousands of immigrants and their kin followed a similar path through the twentieth century, who wants to hear about that?